

FROM ISOLATION TO NORMALIZATION

The WSBA Well-Being Task Force looks to enhance the mental health of Washington's legal institutions

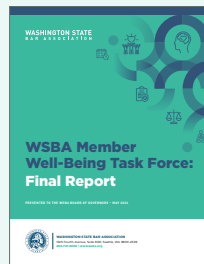
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In 2017, the American Bar Association's (ABA) Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs issued The Path to Lawyer Well-Being, a 73-page report that depicts how the legal profession falls far short in lawyer wellness and offers recommendations for the future. Instead of simply improving the counseling and educational features of state bar wellness programs, the ABA proposed broadly improving legal institutions. Included in its recommendations were well-being pledges for law firms; better mental health oversight for law students, judges, and public law practitioners; and court rules that are mindful of the pressures they place upon attorneys. Gradually states began forming committees to answer this call, and in 2024, Washington followed suit.

The WSBA's Well-Being Task Force was formed by the WSBA Board of Governors for a two-year tenure. Out of 42 applications, the task force's 11 members were drawn from big law, small law, the judiciary, including the Washington Supreme Court, and public members with mental health and other related backgrounds. Spokane City Prosecutor Justin Bingham, who has extensive experience supporting criminal practitioners throughout his career, chaired the task force. The endeavor was massive. In addition to 24 task force meetings, nine work groups focused on particular segments and issues within the legal profession. The work groups, which consisted of task force members as well as 19 additional ad hoc members appointed for their expertise, met twice a month to design surveys, hold feedback sessions, and issue findings. The ultimate goal was to submit a final report to the WSBA with tangible steps toward enhancing well-being among WSBA members and the broader Washington legal community.

What follows are short summaries of the findings and recommendations from each work group.

The WSBA Well-Being Survey Work Group. This five-member work group engaged Matthew S. Thiese, Ph.D., MSPH, from the University of Utah, to help design a comprehensive 40-question survey that was administered by the National Business Research Institute (NBRI). Sent to 10,000 WSBA attorneys, the survey received 903 responses. This yielded a 99.8 percent confidence level and 5 percent margin of error. The findings are too varied to summarize here, but largely reflected a daunting rate of burnout, depression, anxiety, and suicidal thinking among the membership. To read more about the survey results, please review the final report at www.wsba.org/well-being-report. The survey report can be found at Appendix C, p.44.



MORE ONLINE

Access the WSBA Well-Being Task Force Final Report at www.wsba.org/well-being-report.

If you would like to learn more about the WSBA Member Wellness Program and the services we provide, please visit www.wsba.org/wellness.

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Justin Bingham is the Spokane city prosecutor and chair of the WSBA Well-Being Task Force.

Law Students and New Attorneys Work Group. This work group surveyed a small sample of law students and new members within Washington using law school channels and the WSBA New Member List Serve. The work group also leveraged information from the larger survey conducted by NBRI. The findings indicated that law students and new practitioners face acute stress during their transition into the profession, often exacerbated by intense workload expectations and a lack of early-career support. Many reported that the pressure to perform during their initial practice years contributed significantly to burnout and anxiety. The task force recommended integrating well-being programming directly into new lawyer orientations and 1L curricula to establish sustainable habits early. Additionally, the report advises providing students and new members with anonymous, low-barrier access to mental health resources and a structured mentorship program.

Private Practice Work Group. This work group examined private practices, including solo/small firms, mid-size firms, and big law. Feedback surveys were also completed by participants at the Solo and Small Firm Conference. The group also drew upon the findings of the membership survey that sought to address the pressures driven by the billable hour. Findings highlighted the significant impact of the billable hour model and a culture that often equates long hours with professional dedication. This environment can lead to social isolation, high rates of substance use, and a persistent stigma that prevents attorneys from seeking help. The report's primary recommendations focus on leadership accountability, urging firm leaders to demonstrate a personal commitment to well-being and to incentivize participation in wellness activities rather than leaving them as purely voluntary options.

The Government and Public Interest (GPI) Work Group. This work group found that GPI attorneys often contend with heavy, unmanageable caseloads and high exposure to vicarious trauma, which were identified as significant occupational hazards. Recommendations from the work group sought to create mentorship, mutual support programs, resources to address the unique

challenges faced by GPI lawyers such as secondary trauma and compassion fatigue, and improved court rules and caseload reduction.

The Judiciary Work Group. This work group engineered a survey of all judges in the state that received a dramatically high 23 percent response rate. In addition to 28 survey questions, 46 pages of qualitative responses were provided. Key struggles included profound professional isolation, exacerbated by the nature of the bench and the pressure to maintain an appearance of constant neutrality. Findings suggest that this isolation can deter judges from acknowledging mental health challenges or substance-use issues until they reach a crisis point. The task force recommended that courts develop specific policies for managing impairment to ensure both judicial well-being and public trust. Special attention was given to the impact of after-hours warrant duty, the pressures of the evaluation and election cycle, and threats made to judicial officers and their families online. Crucially, the report calls for judicial leadership to actively destigmatize help-seeking by openly communicating that well-being is a core judicial priority. Regular, anonymous judicial well-being surveys were proposed to better track progress and identify emerging needs within the courts.

The Suicide and Addiction Work Group. This work group researched Department of Health statistics on attorney fatalities by suicide. A 14-question survey was administered through WSBA sections, county bar associations, and affinity bar associations and offered opportunities for qualitative responses. The 195 responses provided over 18 pages of candor about the challenges of alcoholism, mental health distress, and burnout among WSBA attorneys. The work group's findings revealed that nearly 10 percent of Washington legal professionals experienced suicidal ideation or engaged in self-harm within the prior year, roughly double the rate found in the general adult population. Furthermore, approximately 85 percent of those affected stated that their legal work environment directly contributed to these thoughts. Regarding substance use, 20 percent said they feel concerned about how often they drink alcohol, compared with 10.9 percent reporting concern in the general U.S. adult population. To combat this, the task force

recommends expanding fully confidential, low-barrier clinical evaluation resources and peer-led intervention frameworks. Additionally, the work group advocates for mandatory education on recognizing early warning signs of impairment.

The Diversity Equity and Inclusion Work Group. This work group reviewed research, analyzed WSBA survey data, and identified systemic barriers impacting well-being. The work group reviewed literature and gained information from key sources. Findings indicated that members from historically

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marginalized groups—including attorneys of color, LGBTQ+ practitioners, and lawyers with disabilities—face disproportionately higher rates of professional isolation, identity-based bias, and burnout. These systemic inequities directly compound existing occupational stressors, which often drive talented, diverse practitioners out of the profession prematurely. The report's primary recommendations focused on building a structured well-being resource hub and embedding mandatory equity-focused well-being education into standard professional development. The work group advised that the WSBA continuously track intersectional demographic data to identify, isolate, and address ongoing disparities in member wellness.

The Member Wellness Program Work Group. This work group found that while various individual wellness resources currently exist, they are underutilized due to lack of awareness or concerns over confidentiality. Crucially, many members expressed concerns that turning to the WSBA's Member Wellness Program for help could compromise their confidentiality or jeopardize their law license. This fear persists despite the fact that Admission and Practice Rule (APR) 19 explicitly ensures the confidentiality of these services and establishes a strict regulatory firewall between disci-

plinary counsel and the Wellness Program. To address this barrier, the task force recommends expanding the pool of available free or low-cost mental health consultations while educating members about the confidentiality protections of APR 19.

The Rules and Regulatory Work Group. This work group focused on institutional policies to support and avoid stigmatizing applicants and members facing mental health or substance use challenges. A key finding indicates that the current framework lacks structured, supportive entry pathways for applicants with a history of impairment, creating barriers to entry into the profession. To address this, the work group supports the implementation of a conditional admission process in Washington, with clear eligibility criteria and monitoring mechanisms. Additionally, the task force recommends exploring structural models like Oregon's State Lawyers Assistance Committee (SLAC) to provide a confidential and rehabilitative alternative to discipline designed to support lawyers whose performance or conduct may be impaired due to mental health challenges, substance use disorders, or other behavioral health issues. These targeted reforms aim to shift aspects of the regulatory environment from a reactive, disciplinary model toward programs focused on early intervention and restorative rehabilitation.

Ultimately, transforming the legal culture in Washington requires a unified effort to dismantle systemic barriers. By prioritizing the normalization of help-seeking to reduce stigma and building deeper community connections, we can counter the isolation experienced across various practices. Concurrently, addressing the structural drivers of stress through workload and regulatory reforms, while integrating equity and inclusivity into all strategies, ensures that systemic pressures are alleviated for all members. Finally, expanding access to holistic resources provides legal professionals with the comprehensive tools needed for long-term health and sustainability. The Board of Governors accepted the final report of the Well-Being Task Force at its May 2026 meeting with the goal of collaborating with WSBA staff and leadership to review and identify the recommendations for implementation. That process is underway. [BN](#)